HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Case No. 13-07

District of Columbia War Memorial
U.S. Reservation 332
West Potomac Park between Independence Avenue, 17th Street, and West Basin Drive SW

Meeting Date:	May 23, 2013
Applicant:	D.C. Preservation League
Affected ANC:	2A
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennee

After careful consideration, the Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the District of Columbia War Memorial and its grounds a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. The staff further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places with a recommendation for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1931 to 1939, encompassing its construction, landscaping, and early alterations and repairs.

The property meets District of Columbia Criterion D ("Architecture and Urbanism") and National Register Criterion C for "embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles, building types… or… expressions of landscape architecture… urban planning, siting, or design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia or the nation," and it possesses "high artistic values."

The property also meets D.C. Criterion B ("History") and National Register Criterion A as a memorial to the local residents who were killed in World War I and a product of a local and national movement to honor them.

The nomination also claims D.C. Criterion F (and another aspect of National Register Criterion C) for the memorial, as an example of "notable works of craftsmen, artists, sculptors, architects, landscape architects, urban planners, engineers, builders, or developers whose works have influenced the evolution of their fields of endeavor, or are significant to the development of the District of Columbia or the nation." The memorial is a fine one and a notable one, and its architects and landscape architect (James L. Greenleaf) are fairly well known. But the nomination could better flesh out the significance and works of especially the principal architect, Frederick H. Brooke.

Background
Like many other cities, Washington, D.C. sought to erect a monument to those citizens and residents who served and died in the Great War. Initial sketches were presented to the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts in 1919. Fundraising began soon after war's end, but a commission to direct the project was not appointed until 1924. Within that year, however, architect Frederick Brooke submitted new sketches. Another round of drawings, revised with the assistance of

Nathan Wyeth and Horace Peaslee, was approved by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts in early 1925. But it would be another six years before construction got under way, a delay principally due to the challenge of paying for the project. The cost was borne by the residents of the District, through contributions large and small, encouraged by the *Evening Star*, the newspaper of Frank B. Noyes, chairman of the memorial commission. Construction began in spring 1931 and had concluded in October, with the planting of many of the trees that would surround the monument. Appropriately, its dedication took place on November 11—Armistice Day. Designed in part to accommodate bands who could play to crowds on an adjacent lawn, the memorial sheltered during its dedication the U.S. Marine Band, led by one of Washington's most famous native sons, John Philip Sousa. Speakers included President Hoover, Frank Noyes, Lieutenant Colonel U.S. Grant III, and Grace Darling Siebold, another Washingtonian and the founder of the Gold Star Mothers, the association of American mothers of killed World War I servicemen.

The memorial, recently restored, is an open-air, circular-plan, marble, Greek temple with fluted Doric columns supporting a dome. It is said to be large enough to accommodate an 80-piece band, and had many occasions to function as a bandstand in its early years. As originally designed, the structure is set in an informal setting of trees framing the concert lawn, but with clear vistas to the north and south.

Evaluation

As a striking, elegant, and finely finished example of a temple-form monument set in a naturalistic grove, the War Memorial clearly meets Criterion C for its excellence of design. It embodies the contemporary flowering of the classical modes of architecture, considered most fitting for the civic remembrance of those who died for their country. But in its secondary function, as bandstand, it reinforced its character as a thing of continual or at least repeated use; of civic, and not just personal, memory; and of gratitude for, even pride in, victory, and a hope for lasting peace.

Especially as restored, the memorial retains a very high degree of historic integrity.

While commemorative works generally do not take their significance from the person, entity or event commemorated, this memorial is the product and symbol of a wave of national mourning that swept the country in the wake of World War I, and thus meets the designation criteria applicable to historical periods, movements and groups associated with broad patterns of history. Although the United States had far fewer casualties than the nations of Europe that were engaged more directly and longer, the nature of all-out war and the scope of its destruction were profoundly shocking. Nearly five million men served in the U.S. armed forces during the war, with 126,000 dying and 234,000 wounded, so the conflict touched most families in some way. In many countries, the war led to economic recession or even rampant inflation and depression, and it spread a virulent influenza pandemic. It fostered the rise of communism and fascism as leading national ideologies. The war gave Americans reservations about the growth of national government, foreign intervention and imperialism, and the influence of industrialists and the press on policy. It also ushered in an era of greater materialism. Memorials are as at least much about the living as the dead; the District of Columbia War Memorial reflects how this community—like other communities across the nation—came to grips with its loss and told the story of the war.

The nomination briefly argues that the memorial merits designation at the national level of significance. The memorial was produced and paid for by residents of the District of Columbia to remember deceased residents of the District, and on that count, its significance, although high, is essentially local in nature. The national significance argument is not elaborated beyond the association of the structure with the McMillan Plan. It lacks, for instance, a comparative look at the war memorials of other places and eras. The memorial certainly has pride of place near the National Mall, appropriate to the seriousness of its subject matter and the fact that the honored dead had perished in a national cause. But while the placement is in a sense a fulfillment of the Senate Park Plan's vision to place additional monuments in the core of the capital, the McMillan Plan could not have, of course, anticipated this particular memorial, nor was it placed precisely as the Plan had anticipated for *some* memorial. It participates in the Plan as a contributing feature, but it cannot bear the national significance of the Plan on its own. In this sense, and at least without additional study of the memorial in the context of its time and building type, it seems more akin to the minor monuments erected around the city, rather than to the national symbols.